



## Land Trusts

# Farming as a collective ... it's not communism

Mike and Kristina are the newest caretakers of a ROSE Land Care Association farm partnering with New Moon to support the local community

• By Melisa Luymes •



The New Moon farm team stands for a photo L-R: Jesse James Barbosa, Kristina Greenaway Courey, Mike Courey, Jonny Courey (Mike's brother), Beck Mitchel and Cody Stroud. (Farm team missing from the photo are Luis Reyes and Kathy Meneses.)

**A**t a bend just before the road crosses the Ausable River south of Ailsa Craig, a shaded laneway emerges into another world: a gorgeous old yellow brick home with blue decorative shutters, chicken coops, the familiar hum of milking time coming from the old barn, and plenty of trucks parked in the yard. Mike Courey comes across the lawn to say hello, with a yellow lab named Moses bounding in front of him.

Mike and his wife Kristina are the newest caretakers of this farm, but they don't own it. In fact, this farm can't be owned by anyone. It is held by a non-profit land trust called ROSE Land Care Association.

You may have read the article on Luna Mia Farm's arrangement with the Steins in last month's issue of *The Rural Voice* and this is the second part of a series on farmland access that describes a more mainstream model of land trusts, if one could call this mainstream.

On a sign at the farm store is a quote by Aldo Leopold: "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

The coffee is great and spirits are high among the New Moon farm team for their Tuesday morning meeting on the store's porch. Before they head off to do another planting

of sweet corn or feed the pigs and chickens, they chat about the farm and pose for a photo.

Some are volunteering, others are paid, but all are there because they care about the environment, community, regenerative agriculture and food sovereignty. In many cases, the team members studied horticulture and are eager to put it into practice. New Moon Community Homestead also has about 30 members who are welcome to visit the farm and volunteer if they like; regardless, they get a weekly share of vegetables and meat. They also sell at London's Hyde Park farmers market on Wednesday afternoons, Shady Pines campground on Friday nights and Ilderton on Saturday mornings.

Mike and Kristina moved to the farm with their children in 2021 and this will be their third growing season as New Moon Community Homestead. They sold their home in London's Old East Village for the opportunity to build up a farm and a community here. They have pastured pigs, chickens, and a sprawling five-acre garden that is in tidy rows covered by a biodegradable mulch made from thistles. There is a drip line irrigation system set up that pumps straight from the river just a few metres from the garden. The couple talk about their plans for investing in on-farm

processing and their hopes to start a crowd-funding campaign to help with the upfront costs.

ROSE Land Care Association is a non-profit association that was founded in 1991 by Sally Vernon and a group of seven other people who were concerned about farmland consolidation and speculative ownership of farmland. They were concerned with the issue of “land grabbing” in which large swaths of farmland (often in the Global South) are purchased by foreign companies,

governments or individuals. But they knew that Canadian land would also be up for grabs, and it is. In their original brochure, ROSE quoted the Institute for Community Economics’ Community Land Trust Handbook: “The question is no longer whether there will be new approaches to property. The question is whose interests they will serve.” From the outset, ROSE’s mission was to support the interests of their local community, through innovative farm ownership models, building

regenerative agriculture, and bringing rural and urban communities together.

That was also the year that Alex and Ellinor Nurnburg immigrated to the area from Germany. They came with a belief that land should not be owned by an individual, but rather be owned collectively with a shared responsibility for its caretaking. They had seen a similar “land trust” model working back in Europe. They worked with ROSE, knocked on doors to fundraise locally and back in

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Germany, pre-selling vacations to the farm, to raise a downpayment. They connected with a unique farm property on the river and ROSE went on to purchase the 180-acre farm from Norm and Ruth Smith for \$430,000 in 1992. At the time, it was called Sunnivue Farm and the Nurnburgs kept the name, but the history of the house dates back to a colourful character named Alexander “Klondike” Stewart who apparently made his fortune slinging beers in the gold rush and came to the area with a saloon dancer in 1900.

ROSE stands for Redeeming Our Soils Economically. One of the mandates from the outset was that the farm be managed biodynamically, which is a holistic, organic method of farming based on the philosophy of Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925). The Nurnburgs farmed the property under these principles, milking cows, growing vegetables and eventually they went on to milk water buffalo. They were also joined by Dagmar Seiboth who grew vegetables, and together they stocked an on-farm store which opened in 1998. Alex, a journalist at heart, wrote an annual newsletter that outlined the highs and lows of Sunnivue Farm over the years, and documented the farm’s visitors, all 800 of them.

Dagmar left after 15 years there, and Alex and Ellinor said farewell to the water buffalo in 2016 as the farm underwent a transition. A few small enterprises, including maple syrup production and a market garden, took root there for some time. ROSE also rented the barn and acreage to two young farmers for a five-year term which allowed them to access the New Entrant Quota Assistance Program for organic milk production.

At the time ROSE purchased Sunnivue farm, farmland trusts were almost unheard of in Ontario, and over 30 years later ROSE is still unique. However, land trusts have evolved in the U.S. and the Agrarian Trust could be a model for structuring farmland trusts going forward. This model consists of a few key components: the donors give support to the Agrarian Trust (a national non-profit organization) to buy farmland on behalf of local

groups, termed “Agrarian Commons”, which are also non-profits, but operating locally. The Agrarian Commons takes ownership of the land, signing long-term leases with farmers that produce food for the local community. The Commons is a board that consists of representatives from the national

- Top: Alex Nurnburg stands by the linden tree that he and Ellinor planted when they moved to the farm in the early 1990s.
- Middle: Surplus scapes and lettuce are donated to the London Food Coalition that re-distributes it to nonprofits that support people who are food insecure.
- Bottom: ROSE Board member, Mary Simpson, and New Moon farm team member, Jonny Courey. (Courtesy of Kristina Greenaway Courey)



Agrarian Trust, the farmer(s), and the local community and they sign the longest leases permitted by their state, in some cases that is 99 years.

Similar to Ontario, farmland prices in the U.S. have risen astronomically in the last decades, and the average age of an American farmer is 58.1, similar to Ontario's at 56.7. According to Agrarian Trust, 40 per cent of U.S. farmland (400 million acres) will be transferring ownership in the next 15 years. In many cases, older farmers are counting on the sale

of their land at current market value for their retirement, thereby cursing the next generation of farmers with a debt they wouldn't be able to pay back through farming it, at least not within their lifetimes.

"The price of farmland has decoupled from agricultural production," says Mike. "How does it make sense for farming?" In the next decades, Canada will be facing a similar transfer of land, likely to either large farmers who can leverage the rest of their properties, non-farm

investors who will rent out the land, or to developers that may take the land out of production entirely. The board members of ROSE can point to several local examples in which large landholdings were sold to investors, local non-agricultural businesses or those with an agricultural mandate, such as Bonnefield.

What does this mean for local food? New farmers across North America face farmland prices that restrict access to most, especially to those who opt for the intensive



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labour and thin margins of growing food for local markets. These farmers may find land to rent, but they don't often have the security in a rental agreement that would allow them to invest or build equity. To create land security for these farmers and protect local food markets, these kinds of land trusts aim to buy land in order to remove it from the market entirely, and reserve it for the community. They accept land donations, or crowd-source funds to buy farmland outright, one last time. It will be held in perpetuity by this non-profit entity, to provide affordable spaces for small- to mid-size farms to grow organic food for the local community.

Just a quick note: If you're thinking this sounds like communism, it isn't. Rest assured that farmers still own their businesses, machinery and other infrastructure and are very much operating within a market economy, just without a large debt hanging over their head.

They do, however, have to work with a board of directors. In this case, the ROSE Board currently includes long-time members Hans Rosch, Jens Stickling, and Dagmar Wendt along with newcomers like Mary Simpson, Katherine Lawless, Josh Laurence and Kristina Greenaway Courey, the farmer delegate.

It is not easy work, working together. There is a large investment of time in meetings and decision-making. Mike and Kristina spent several months working alongside the ROSE board to develop a new lease and supporting Alex and Ellinor's transition off of Sunnivue

Farm and into town. The Nurnburgs still stop by the farm, as do Norm and Ruth Smith, a testament to their collective focus on community and land stewardship.

To work more efficiently and equitably, ROSE adopted a transformative model of dynamic governance termed Sociocracy. This decision-making model builds trust between all parties; it decentralizes decision making to various groups and those groups are structured so that all voices are heard and decisions are made by consent.

Regardless of who or how, the goals of ROSE have remained consistent from the beginning. The goals are to keep the farm safe from private ownership, only to be used in ecologically sound and economically non-speculative purposes, striving for biodynamic farming practices, providing social, therapeutic and educational activities for the community and to assist groups or projects with similar aims. These aims are written right into the lease. Mike and Kristina have similar goals for the property and their focus on community-building and the environment make them ideal farmers for a land trust arrangement.

Mike has a farming background and the couple met while studying Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, where Mike went on to get a PhD and continues to work as a professor. The couple connected with ROSE through board member Jens Stickling through their involvement in their Old East Village community group. Since they have moved to the farm, the Coureys have been using the farm for hosting

community events, school groups and even day camps. They are both passionate about food sovereignty, investing in regional food for community resiliency, and community wealth building tools. They provide employment for people with disabilities through the Hutton House, donate food to the London Food Coalition and much more.

"We are aiming to build economies that are embedded with the tools for shared ownership, risk and mutual rewards," says Mike. New Moon Community Homestead now has a long-term lease that would allow them to borrow against 20 per cent of the value of the farm, build equity and invest in the property in such a way that it would be repayable to them in part if they chose to leave at some point. Mike and Kristina are also discussing equity-building with the New Moon farm team.

The Coureys want to build their business to be self-reliant and sustainable economically and they understand the importance of both investment and scale. They are learning from mentors Martin DeGroot who built Mapleton's Organic (ice cream brand), Leisure Farms that operates a larger farm and tourist destination near Sturgeon Falls as well as Chris Newman of Sylvanaqua Farms in Virginia, who makes online content about scaling up regenerative agriculture. Mike and Kristina know that their next step is to leap into a big investment into the property and are figuring out next steps. As for ROSE, they are eager to replicate this model on more acres to support more communities and farmers.

"All this requires a strong belief in humanity," Kristina says, and the couple is optimistic and determined to put the shared principles of ROSE Land Care Association and New Moon Community Homestead into practice. For those interested in community ownership, ROSE Board member Mary Simpson recommends the book *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good*, by Heather Menzies. And to learn more about what's happening on the farm, see [newmooncommunityhomestead.ca](http://newmooncommunityhomestead.ca) ◊

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